JAYANTA MAHAPATRA (1929-), The most celebrated Indo-English poet, is the author of *nine* books of poems. Winner of the 1975 Jacob Glastein Memorial Award of Chicago's *Poetry* magazine and the 1981 National Academy of Letters Award, Mahapatra is getting increasingly well known in the U.S.S.R. the U.S.A. Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, England, Denmark and Itlay. In 1976 he was a visiting writer with the International Writing Program, Iowa City and spent a week as visiting writer at St. Andrews Presbyterion College in North Carolina. In 1978, Mahapatra was named Australia's Cultural Award Visitor and in 1980 he received the Japan Foundation Visitor's Award. His works have appeared in various internationally known journals like *Hudson Review, New Letters. Asia Week, Poetry, Kenyon Review, Sewanee Review, boundary 2, New York Quarterly, Times Literary Suppliment, Queen's Quarterly* and *Westerly.*

His new book of poems *Burden of Waves and Fruit* will be published by Three Continents Press, Washington D.C. soon. In 1985, Mahapatra visited the U. S. S. R. as an Indo-Soviet Cultural Exchange Writer. In the beginning of this year, he was awarded a fellowship by the Rockfeller Foundation to write poetry in Itlay. These days Mahapatra lives in Cuttack where he edits *Chandrabhaga,* a magazine of new writing from India and acts as poetry editor of *The Telegraph.*

DISPOSSESSED NESTS

THE 1984 POEMS

JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

Nirala Series–**4**

Edited By
YUYUTSU R. D.
RAMANAND RATHI



Nirala Publications
Jaipur New Delhi

Nirala Publications
Ghat Gate,
Jaipur-302003 (India)

First Edition 1986

Cover Photograph : Courtsey of Kishore Parekh
Cover design by Vinod Bhardwaj

Price :
Paper Rs. 20.00
Hardcover Rs. 75.00

Printed at : Indo-Burma Printers,
Raja Park, Jaipur-302004

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several poems in this book were first published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India*. Gratitude is expressed to its editor for permission to reprint them herein.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POETRY :

Close the Sky, Ten by Ten
Svayamvara & Other Poems
A Father's Hours
A Rain of Rites
Waiting
The False Start
Relationship
Life Signs
Burden of Waves & Fruit (forthcoming)

POETRY TRANSLATIONS :

Countermeasures, 1973
Wings of the Past, 1976
Song of Kubja & Other Poems, 1981

EDITED :

South & West (USA) : (Special India Issue, 1973)
Chandrabhaga : (A magazine of new writing from India)
The Telegraph : Poetry Editor

for

Alec and Penelope Hope

NIRALA SERIES

A Series of Contemporary Literature

David Ray : Elysium In The Halls Of Hell

Ramanand Rathi : Dying In Rajasthan

Yuyutsu R. D. : A Prayer In Daylight

Jayanta Mahapatra : Dispossessed Nests

Banira Giri : From The Other End

Bimal Nibha : Men Before Fire

INTRODUCTION

A thirsty pitcher hit the heart of a well and a cry cracke in the sunken throat of a peacock.

If this evening was different from others, it was for th fact that even though the sun had shattered its head on th horizon's rim, the rain of fire kept pouring in from above

Heads adroop over cracked wooden tables, we sat in deserted restaurant shaken by the resurged violence of Punjab One of us belongs to Punjab and the increasing number o corpses piling up in the vaults of our consciousness made u strongly think about the question of migration.

But was it possible ?

In Chandigarh and New Delhi high flown speeches wer being delivered from the cool bullet proof cells and pompou drama of peace rallies feigned to beguile the burning winds o hatred Deep in us, the beats of Bhangra footsteps and danc of tassels in the golden wheatfields stirred notes of nostalgia with a helpless sigh we swallowed the metaphors of memor and made plans of migrating from Punjab !

But was it really possible ?

A few years ago in Delhi we met a man, Shiv Kumar from a small village near Batala. He could tell the taste of hi village well's water even if you place a thousand pitchers befor him The juice of his own landscape he could identify becaus his blood vessels were emotionally linked with the fields streets, ponds—with the each and every object of his village.

Now, when Shiv has to desert his village, won't the bloo of broken vessels splatter in the streets ?

In *Dispossessed Nests* one hears these wails of a world shattered within a human heart Like burning rods of truth Mahapatra's poems branded the screens of our consciousness. In these poems we find deeply anguished outpours of an acutely sensitive man aspiring to capture a disintegrated world in the light of metaphors deriving their heat either from the torturous memory of the country's recent past or from a minute observation of the natural components.

But these metaphors of Mahapatra aren't just verbal jewels, they are exquisitely evocative memoirs of the whole Indian community Employing this ingenious metaphoric technique, Mahapatra succeeds in introducing the new grammar of the country's simmering chaos. The world of nature is rendered in the context of the frustration of a turbulent community : 'The dry riverbed/wrapped up in a shroud of moonlight,' 'Pale moonlight/tills/death's wild land', 'Sultry July/the grasses of the dead/are growing fast', 'This night of the decaying bodies', 'the ruined light of stars', 'The white truck with painted AMBULANCE fighting my thoughts in the sun', 'when river floods with the tumours of noiseless tears', 'the peacock's curve is measured with flames of hate.'

The natural components like rainbow, seashore, sky, riverbed, shadow and sun are employed to reflect upon the tendency of a nation squirming in chaos :

> Blades of light,
> the July heat,
> and two ripped-out eyes
> shaking their tears.
>
> What time is it now ?
> It is that moment perhaps
> when the rainbow chokes
> at the end of its leash.

Mahapatra fills the vessels of stereotyped words with new meanings. Creatively inverting the shades of hackneyed words he succeeds in presenting a dazzlingly sincere account of the harsh realities

Punjab and Bhopal are the chief events of the book. In

case of Punjab using colour imagery ('In the eyes/of the mask too/is a trembling/of purple'), Mahapatra exposes the buried horror of the long and supreme knives :

Around
a slender waist
a petticoat stirs
in the wind,
looking absurd,
the torso
looking about
for its missing head.

Similarly, in Bhopal the poet sees the self-centered dance of the bejewelled snakes blinding the impoverished eyes; an ugly dance of the multinational companies, a dance more demonic than the *Tandava* of Shiva...a living hell of the crying, dying people gasping for breath !

Instead of sucking their energy from the veins of real life, the poems explore the theoretical contexts of the Punjab and Bhopal events. In the lucent light of the minute shifts in the natural world the journalistic content of the book is flared. In poem 15, for example, the issue of "The sealed tomb of one's faith', the fanatics' blind faith in the heroic hereditary is artistically explored :

Pray then to those fanatics who love their god as they love themselves,
to the veins filthy with blood and to the belly
fattened with the brackish fluid or seeding
when eyes grow misty with light one has never seen--

In the same outspoken vein Mahapatra evokes the issue of sacrifice in vain :

Pray to the sealed tomb of one's faith
raging with the leucocytes in the blood of that hidden animal
to the clenched fist, and hack those useless arms
which will only inherit
our mothers's spirit of sacrifice bringing freedom in death

Mahapatra narrates the hijacking episode to analyse the national addiction to violence :

...Maybe
there were women on the aircraft
who fell in love with their captors.
And the bullets didn't hurt too perhaps...

The vermilion on the woman's forehead
ripples in the dark. Her kid daughter wants
her favorite hijacking anecdote narrated again
to lull her to sleep.

In the same elegiac tone the poet reflects upon the great betrayal by the corrupt political leaders :

The weariness of the ages festers
into hard knots of meanness here and there

The taste that comes of our leaders
shirking the questions of people's existence

\- - -

The tall dark mountains burying their faces
in the false snow to stifle their laughter

\- - -

..No more. Ah love, we had read so much
about you, about freedom. Was everything you did,
Gandhiji, only an act you put on for posterity ?

with India, our India, barely worth raping ?

The melancholic and meditative tone of the poems ultimately lands you in a lonely island where you feel you are all alone in your struggles. Of course you do feel the agony of the world around passionately but you do not possess the fire of a spiritual struggle of a potent community reacting against the callous forces of a corrupt socio-economic setup. You feel you are floating in the sky of your own suffering, completely lost in a state of mental inertia *where you 'nurse the* sickness of fear', where you hear, 'water folding and turning restlessly on stone', where 'Fears of sinking boats blacken' your noons, where 'An owl circles and chases a tale/through the leaves,' and 'a star/looks fixed in space's old embrace'. And an eloquent shower of metaphors drenches you only if you belong completely to your inner island, thoroughly familiar with its subtle moods.

Summer, 1986
JAIPUR

Yuyutsu R. D.
Ramanand Rathi

BEWILDERED WHEATFIELDS

"The light of the earth comes out of its eyelids
not like a bell's ringing, but more like tears"

—Pablo Neruda

1

The dry riverbed
wrapped up in a shroud of moonlight.

A death lasts.

This night of the decaying bodies
of those whom I love,

reverberates
with the ruined light of stars.

2

In these parts down south
we say we are calm people
who go to sleep without misgivings.
We never take our lives seriously.
Or perhaps
we don't let ourselves get carried away.

But somewhere
amidst bewildered wheatfields
the cool night wind snips off the skin
from the firm fruit of reason.
The earth is God in a rage.
Sunlight is too silent an energy
running over and over endlessly.

And elsewhere
a temple drifts away
from vague stretched-out hands.
And God asks:
What is your thunder about, dark skies?
Must you dry up the river to hear the sands breathe?
Is your hate of man your ultimate fate?

3

Here
my father lies dying,
I watch him die.

Night spreads.
Maybe it is time,

or perhaps the thought
of an hour at his bedside
stupifies a part of me
that's not already doomed,
up north somewhere.

4

There's probably something good
on television tonight.

Another death?

A little pile of ash
uncurls
like a woken beast.

5

In the eyes
of the mask too,
is a trembling
of purple.

Around
a slender waist
a petticoat stirs
in the wind,
looking absurd,
the torso
looking about
for its missing head.

Pale moonlight
tills
death's wild land,
a roil of smoke
seems
to lift its hands
in supplication.

6

Sultry July,
the grasses of the dead
are growing fast.

A little girl's hate
is already
a part of her,
rainwater splatters
like
her murdered father's blood.

When did she
get used to the world?
She
frightens us.

7

To be human
is to see in a dream perhaps
the one who can never be seen;
perhaps to hire out a tractor
to work the fields
or to hook the slippery little carp
which swim
among the muddy puddles

8

Nothing very bad or untoward, they all insist.
The terrorist who hijacked Flight 405
to Lahore even doled out milk and fruit
to children and the old. He was a mere
boy, they said, he even smiled,
shook hands and broke down in the end
when everything got over. Maybe
Kiran wanted to believe something good too
had come out of it. Maybe it would help
to make sense out of the fact
how humane the terrorists were. Even days after
the nightmare it's hard to believe
the Kapurs shouting *Long Live Khalistan*
alongwith the terrorists in unison,
like well-trained protesters. Maybe
there were women on the aircraft
who fell in love with their captors.
And the bullets didn't hurt too perhaps....

The vermilion on the woman's forehead
ripples in the dark. Her kid daughter wants
her favorite hijacking anecdote narrated again
to lull her to sleep.

9

As abstinate as the old,
this thought of death.

Years ago, just a ghost
without a name, a trembling
at a door near the windows.

My heart is intricate now,
it resents objects, the doorbell,
the perfect mirror,
it gouges the impatient darkness
in the city of the round–the-clock
curfew, and the white trucks
painted AMBULANCE fighting
my thought in the sun.

10

This is the last explosion,
we hope,
and wait.

How we wonder
in the mind's expanding nova,
the dispossessed nests.

11

The wind fills with darkness.
It closes the door softly and goes out
suddenly like a traffic light. It carries
the excited beat of lines of marchers
protesting against a corrupt government,
and the voice of the lonely woman
standing in the queue for her sustenance allowance
(her husband shot dead by terrorists last month)—
a voice which the roar
of the Minister's jet cuts short.

And the old man whom I call Father
slowly opens his mouth to swallow
the spoonfuls of glucose being fed to him.
I have been watching him lie in his bed
for over two years now.

The wind bothers me with its mysterious freedom,
with no memory of the voices of the recent dead
or of those who died before them.
Whose voice is it I hear now ? Theirs,
or my mother's
waiting in the hush for Father's death ?
A finger of thė wind
merely tickles my consciousness.

12

The man of the house
walks back
to the afternoon
and sits in a fear.

Blades of light,
the July heat,
and two ripped-out eyes
shaking their tears.

What time is it now?
It is that moment perhaps
when the rainbow chokes
at the end of its leash.

Only the headlines
in the newspapers
sweep pompously across
the clock-face of death.

13

All day long
fiery dusts seethe
on the plains of the heart.

Swifts, like spirits,
claim the lost air
of Shakuni-skies;

under a merciless sun
angry masks barter faith
with the golden litany of the Punjab.

How long the journey is,
and the light
leaping in the skin --

how like a fine wind
this nature of evil
we cannot feel flowing in the warm dusk.

14

Darkness stalks
the streets somewhere.
Eyes of bright yellow sunflowers
reveal their fright.
Someone who walks in the dark
wants his victim strong and powerful,
he promises himself
the blood of a minister
or high government official.
No dreams blow in the unlocked skull.
Only shadows
pick up the reigns of reality in Amritsar,
shadows
of long and supreme knives.

15

When the unwelcome memory appears
with its gesture of the deathless, domestic as a mother,
naked as a traveller from another place
and stands there a moment like a knifed youth
in the marketplace holding up his burst entrails
as he falls and ruffles his black silky hair,

when the drunken woman of the indulgent lie
starts shrieking with laughter, her face
lifted with the new caste of liberation and reality —
when the peacock's curve is measured with flames of hate
and the monsoon rain of whiteness withers up like skin
when the tides of light end with streaks of sullen
blackness
and the numbed weeds sway with the dead heads of
their flowers,

Pray then to those fanatics who love their god as
they love themselves,

to the veins filthy with blood and to the belly
fattened with the brackish fluid of seeding
when eyes grow misty with light one has never seen—

when the memory appears again over a land

with that air of a mother which makes us simply
clutch our hearts in grief,
when the river floods with tumours of noiseless tears

in the orange-coloured masks of possesed firedancers
who must dance past their dead to paralyze us with fear,
and the silence bought by slaughter and subversion
becomes one eager ink-black splotch in the map of the skir

Pray to the sealed tomb of one's faith
raging with the leucocytes in the blood of that
hidden animal
to the clenched fist, and hack those useless arms
which will only inherit
our mothers's spirit of sacrifice bringing freedom in death

16

Death throes
of epics locked inside shadows

The young terrorist's face
is illuminated
by the light of his grandest hour

The hail of glass and plaster
looks on at his humility
as the calendar hatches India's history

a lifeless story
chewed on by the vultures of a country's leaders

17

It is the silence. Words
can only ask the wrong question
at the wrong time.
For silence is the only evidence
left behind, strange solace
for mankind.

Alive,
scarlet colours swirled,
the clear, sharp cold,
time of the hollow wound
and the incinerated sun,
time of the unloved earth.

Lonelier than ever
is this autumn of smoke and ash.
But the air is awake
and I have forgotten how to love.
And an empty smile on the grass
I can never again trust.

Behind,
the open door.
A silence remains stretched
beyond measure, the heart
of our knowledge's labyrinth
born from an ignorance of our own.

19

The city wanders.
I try to locate Betelgeuse.
Even as a child I remember
I would look up,
until the moon and stars
were lost behind me.
Today I lean back against that light
which smells of stale sweat
and less pleasant things.

Here the last houses in the city
are simply smiling into the darkness.
Now a man knows only two ways
for dealing with a stray woman:
he rapes her
and he kills her.

20

The weariness of t ages festers
into hard knots of meanness here and there

The taste that comes of our leaders
shirking the questions of people's existence

The shame of travellers who have lost their ways
in India

The cold stairs down to the water
their breathing rasping hoarsely in the winter mist

The tall dark mountains burying their faces
in the false snow to stifle their laughter

The river wailing with the strange voices of the lost
riding on until all it felt
was the darkness and the rush of stranger seas

This country urges us to seek the stars at night,
too full as we are of mythic battles, angry gods
and the heroism of Hanuman. Upon those
distant pinpoints of light we might reconstruct
some other world, denying memory, journeying
no more. No more. Ah love, we had read so much
about you, about freedom. Was everything you did,
Gandhiji, only an act you put on for posterity ?

With India, our India, barely worth raping ?

21

Alone again
I continue to nurse the sickness of fear.
Somewhere in the dark an engine whistles.
Night's secrets and the endless
purity of stars locked like my hands
under my head. Listening, to my own efforts
at quietening memory; and knotting this body,
coaxing the fragments of living into a poem.
I know I have been in love with the world
a little too much, taken my own place
for granted and become the secret landscape
like the redeeming monument of a Gandhi
in the India of my illusive glass.
Here the dead twigs of banyan
scratch my skin; and farther, go on to tear
the skies of my future. Alone again,
with time to question myself,
I begin with the kind things I must say to others
because of my fear,
with the liniment of acceptance
spread over my wounded past's breast,
knowing that the pigeons of my town
must fly and perch on the unspoken sadness
of the bronze statue
decapitated once in sudden redness.

22

A black bile of mad unrest
runs out of avenging mouths
For this is the hour of the deep sigh
that shakes the politicians' dust of Delhi
The hour when cold cêment benches of the city parks
stalk the blood of man, when
my History of omens and fears and revenge
rages in the stars
This is the hour of breaking out
of the moral restraints of my country's adolescence
as the evil of senseless rumours swarms over me,
urging me to find my place in the world of my people—
And what else but an evening of claustral shadow
that would let one embrace wanton nightmare?

Past the eardrums bursting
with the hoarse mindless shouting of the mob
Past the vastness of the sky
which holds the seed of things to come
And the sad doors set within arched frames
where stand the women with lines of age
giving their features a powerful dignity
Past the jade green crowns of banyans
which conceal the illusions of a bastard past:

the light and the fire,
the ambiguous abandon of the elemental spirit

They wave their moist hands of red blood
For this is the hour when the evening once more
demonstrates its passionless mediocrity
And the womb of the Sun longs perhaps
for the carrion stench of terror
to link one bit of Time
to another
And the long pulse of soft flute notes
to revoke its rapist behaviour in our own prehistoric pack

Golden smoke in the autumn darkness
rises and turns only to exhort them to some terrible unity
more than ever for the 'good' of their country
Even though no one answers anyone any more
And the last words of Man keep on
following the evening:
How false they seem, even to themselves

And the jasmine's arms stretch out
over the frantic waters of the Yamuna
The evening subdued by the blood-oracle's fatality
to tremble its way into something resembling Sleep

23

The huge siren hangs over acres of empty streets
where a child looks across its dead mother
into his face, its all-white emptiness echoing.
He is its father but he is afraid to pull the child
into his arms, even to call out its name, afraid
his heart would burst. Unmilked cows lie stretched out
in the fields, while the impotent cry of warning
tightens its coils round the child's throat. Someone's
feces left behind nearby, as he lay dying;
couldn't they smell it? In this darkness
the child's innocence is almost like a ripe fruit,
it tries to keep its death still. You might, after all,
take this as another episode in an enormous pathological
dream of Dharma. Ane let your camera follow it,
to tell all the tales that can be told. And then?
So it would have changed so much in the journey
you would no longer know it. Now the look on the child's
face surprises a languor out of him. He smells
the ocean he has never seen, the whole city around him
tilting forlorn, roofless; and Leela, his child,
who, under his gaze, is slowly growing less anxious
about betraying those who love and trust her.
A form of innocence tells: "Is your sky blue?"
"Can you let it run between your fingers?"

A DANCE OF BEJEWELLED SNAKES

Come and see the blood in the streets.
Come and see
the blood in the streets
Come and see the blood
in the streets !

—Pablo Neruda

24

"Victim Number 569, Leela, aged 5, daughter of Dayaram of Chola Kenchi, Bhopal. Died of gas poisoning on 3rd December 1984."

–India Today
Cover Photograph, 31st Dec. 1984

i

The eyes are deep and hard in Leela's sockets.
And the face looks peaceful in death.
That's what they say, the onlookers.
What would Leela have said
had she grown up to her father's age ?

But her face,
it seems to grow best in death.
Her father Dayaram of Chola Kenchi
would never believe me, his half–waking mind
trying fruitlessly to drain the sea of his reality.

Soon he will burn Leela out of himself.
Soon her eyes will soften, turn glutinous and fume.
Perhaps something crueller
will happen even here alongwith the fish
rising gracefully from the river in wispy nets

ii

In another nightmare I dream of Leela's eyes
filling with pain, like sails filling with wind.
Or perhaps it was only the utter certainty
of her look, a steel that resolved
the stillness of the world's make-believe.

This utter certainty of the horizon,
which belongs to untroubled distance
or to whoever comes across it.

25

Somewhere the rain kicks someone
like an enraged feudal landlord,
somewhere the wind cuts a tender face
without reason like a mean whip.

Somewhere a dance of bejewelled snakes
blinds two impoversihed eyes,
somewhere the iron bars uselessly shake
the earth for the man who's been too long
in prison.

Somewhere the rainwater
tries to wash the stained earth clean,
somewhere the wind carries the ash
of a woman's burning flesh toward a man's
dead mind.

Somewhere a winner
lets himself go completely,
somewhere a loser simply
slumps against a lifeless worn prayer.

Somewhere someone looks on horrified
as a trite quarrel slashes open another's
viscera,
a wind of rage points to its goal
and shatters the moment like a bomb.

In a little corner of tenderness one tries
to hide in

can one catch one's breath?
Ah wind, that in another moment
can engulf all torture and leave no trace
behind.

Strange is the place to which you never belong.
But somewhere among the crowd you are there.
Young men stand in the crossroads, suddenly taller,
without fear.
There is nothing wrong with the moment, you know.
The rain slowly settles down, the wind blows smooth
and clear.
The tree outside the window just quivers to grasp
more air.

26

With its black face the thunder
breaks into silence, the rain collides
noisily with earth, and an unsettled nation
unsettles further. In the steep wind
the bamboos stoop over the mossed stones
of temples, in this weather the crooked new grass
occupies the places of others. The sodden rats
of memory scamper from their water-logged holes,
desperately we try to find out where
our lives have brought us. So many things,
as the country's leaders wait for a sign,
and a future this present will not enable us
to live in. Who cares about others' sorrows,
those victims like winged insects
drawn from the earth after rain? As we must never
question and must pretend not to know,
our pain like water buries its face
on earth's shoulder and goes off to sleep
like a weary child. When we learn to let
our minds leave us, we do not care where
true feeling lies, or for a country's
national anthem floating around in counterfeit freedom;
its time moves to echo the rain-voice
lying too deep for our nerves' reach, besieging
in vain the poet's lonely walls. Then
our hands stretch forward to touch those
who are strange to us. And we hear
water folding and turning restlessly on stone.

27

Fears of sinking boats blacken this noon;
the harsh summer turns into an endless wound.
Our eyes draw brightness from their fires
and dim from too much brilliance.
We bring our memories out from nowhere
so that they penetrate the hour's haze:
the view of the old changes. Slowly
a line of time smoothens out on my brow.

Blue skies have settled on the hill,
in my eyes birds pull still
at the loneliness of earth.
Here my hands stiffen for the struggle of truth,
and the lips part as if to speak of death
for that would only reveal our purpose
to sink our roots and nourish the music of blood.
Your face reappears at the door
like a dry riverbed that shall be flooded
in the rains of our fabrications.

And the memory moves past me
measuring the distances that frighten us.
Voyages of lost travellers, hypnotised feelings
on walls of stone, we follow you numbly
from summer to summer,
easier to get at the history which defeats us.

28

The country we try to leave behind
seems upset by its own silence.

Someone wants to make us believe
that future generations
will go on with the games we have played.
Our people recognize the sweet smell of danger
and go back to sleep in the shadows of trees.
The young are excited by mysterious grafitti
on walls and monuments
and crouch like animals
at the edge of this breathless jungle.
Or perhaps like mosquitoes enraged
in the heavy heat.

Skinny sad-eyed cattle of our day
are overpowered
by the strong smell of sun-warmed leaves and grass.
And by the sinister shadow
of the minister with the dark power of his government
in the merciful sun.

For although the dead don't answer
and the November stars are only in the way
the country we try to leave behind
will let someone in some year to come
possess that silence of freedom from fate.

29

The leaves of the dark tree of India
are gasping for breath
across the green air.

An owl circles and chases a tale
through the leaves, a star
looks fixed in space's old embrace.

And I have a dream.
It is like a boy in a classroom
who hasn't understood what teacher is saying
but puts on a knowing smile for all to believe.

I can only hear the hum of silent, shut-in machinery.

30

Now that your dark night slips free
of the burning grasp of age-old stars,
now that joy is a feeble bloom of light
dispersing in the thin waters of memory,
my hardened life can find no answers.
Your gaff has sunk deep into the earth,
yet summer and winter shall come back once
to roll over and over in the torn grass
and tremble again in the stricken skins
of our homes. And now, what hand
do you hold out fondly for us?
What look of triumph that must pass
into the silence of the world, ever?
This darkness has lived long enough
for its nights to overcome its victims.
Meekly you watch a woman's broken nails
draw blood on her last cry's rim,
you observe the white meadow turn over
as blazing tigers
lair inside your great bowl of mysteries.
Perhaps deaf now, you're empty of meaning,
walking, stirring, reaching ahead of me.
I can now hear the broken voice of the night,
crying in my hands, bloody and black,
and carrying with it the faint smells
of flowers well past their best.

31

The morning's streets are already astir
with dappled autumn sunlight.
Distantly, cars roar past the Embassies.
Stretched along the quietude of trees
Death lies frozen, wondering
if the light birdcalls will give Him away.
Clusters of yellow flowers peep out
with their queer wild gaze:
ah, the dimensions of an old anguish.

A man stands there, afraid of what She is,
the blossoms of revenge ablaze on his face.
Bringing up the pāst is part of the game,
his ominous dark patina of poetic justice.
And in this light a sten gun
on the side of cruel reason sings.
Suddenly the day has grown colder. Further away
a young girl called Priyanka hears something
which makes her heart feel like a hot ball of lead.

Who knows what kind of myth
this is going to make in a hundred years?
Schooling in Europe, listening once
to Beethoven in your dress of Swiss voile,
how would you know you'd be alone, all alone
the final days, building your whole life upon it,
your solitude the same thing as your India, your dream?

* * *

Today I'm finding it harder than ever
as I think of putting myself in your shoes.
You are surer than my sleep, a fierce seed
in the earth, overwhelming as a waterfall
in Venezuela. A smell of burning leaves
stifles the sunlight. Something
comes flapping through the sky as I watch:
the same cloud of paranoia, talons glinting in the sun.

32

Shantytown, go climb up the mansions
of your beautiful dream city,
learn English,
fight against your dark sleep.
Once there were thirteen years that pulled the soft body
of Lakshmi out of shape,
and those years understood that she was merely agreeing
with anything that would stop the boredom for a while,
and they made her smell their smells
and feel their presence of pelts and blood.
Once there were thirteen years that breathed still,
making her pregnant nine times in those thirteen years,
watching her,
waiting for the death she owed them.
Earth was a plain grey ramp
on which the children stand and stare,
looking for the performance when it gets under way.
They put on expressions which are attempts
to duplicate Amitabh Bachchan's, and wander across
the rough ground beyond their bare brown legs.
Who knew the stranger advancing toward them,
proud to the sickness and the hunger and the loss,
vain to the sun and the sky,
smiling and looking for ways
to hide reality from people?
who knew of plans
that could lead the heart to an excited beat?
The dream city grows closer

and people can feel the fear of it.
The voice from a distant loudspeaker
fails to reveal the empty smile of its speaker.
The death Lakshmi owed her thirteen years
in the messy veranda of Intensive Care
was broken in upon by celebrating voices and wild laughter
before it rolled over and faced the blue of the sky.

They say
the hand doesn't need to understand
what it can help to do well.
And the door doesn't need to know
why it looked on into a short evening of honesty.
This city is too perfect to let others destroy it.
In the long play toward nothing,
the children think they hear themselves laughing —
they hear it in front of them, and stop,
holding their breaths
as though they were isolating a moment in time,
perhaps explorers,
prepared for crueller deaths;
and the women, ugly,
but trying hard to be tempting.
Shantytown,
Salute the great dream city.
Isn't it written that their eyes shall be lost
behind their darker sleep
with their shadows running ahead?

Never say that their years are flayed from them.
Never say that those flowers are for their hair.
Never talk of pity, or beauty, laughter or honour.
Remember their breasts are meat, the dream city's share.

For if anything happens,
their dreams of belief tell them that their gods
and their government shall take care of them.

33

Noon. Stale smells in her shack
of turmeric and burnt oil.
A door of straw, with its look
she is always waiting for,
but rich, clandestine.

Echoing whispers
of voices behind the bars
of light: Yashoda,
are you arranging another abortion
for your fourteen-year daughter?

The glare of noon startles.
She could choke on it.
Why do you need a family, Yashoda?
She had learnt to expect lies
and tears, fights,
a little rice and vegetables,
similar blessings,
the bite of human beings.

Noon growing, night and noon.
The door: should it
keep the silences off ?
Time might beguile her into betrayals,

but she will sit up to all hours
hearing her favorite
film songs over the radio.
Brimful of light,
she cannot keep the door of her heart's shack
closed,
to see purpose or meaning
or all such difficult things.

34

we are given to hate one another
Five thousand years of incense permeates our skin
Banana leaves coolly raise their hatchets
while history slips through the fingers of air
and falls on the hard earth

Only our children will know
when it arises again, loose and shapeless
In its clenched fists
the rusty blade of a long-dead emperor

35

Deep dusk, trees left behind on the earth
like slum boys left to fend for their own.
Those hill slopes keep growing darker. Just beyond
the backyard fence two nameless children
kindle a fire and feverishly skin a freshly killed
pigeon.
Soft screams keep their hunger wakeful and large.

Once, I remember, I was awakened
by someone's laughter outside the window.
It was evening. I did not recognize
the voices. Was it true what they were saying
about me? Innocence was revealed to me
in a land less barren and ruinous —
not my own. Draupadi had dragged
her battered body into the night
but already the dawn had spread inside her soul
its wide grey solitude.

But look: how the moon still
shows a long lost time
in the rust-stained rainwater in a stone's hollow.
Bells ring somewhere. But the glow is stale
as though from a thousand dead fingertips,
and the night passes, and white flowers
open in the tumbled turf
showing their small charred skulls.

Seeking rest, sanctuary,
I stamp out what's left of the fire,
scatter the ashes.
The trees appear to take the entire weight of the earth.
Dark roots spread around the land's face
with the same unattainable smile,
gestures of a future divinity.

OTHER BOOKS BY JAYANTA MAHAPATRA

POETRY :

Close the Sky, Ten by Ten (Dialógue, Calcutta, 1971)

Svayamvara & Other Poems (Writers' Workshop, Calcutta, 1971)

A Father's Hours (United Writers, Calcutta, 1976)

A Rain of Rites (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1976)

Waiting (Samkaleen Prakashan, Delhi, 1979)

The False Start (Clearing House, Bombay, 1980)

Relationship (Greenfield Review Press, N Y., 1980)

Life Signs (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983)

Burden of Waves & Fruit-forthcoming-(Three Continents Press, Washington, D C., 1986)

POETRY TRANSLATIONS :

Countermeasures, 1973

Wings of the Past, 1976

Song of Kubja & Other Poems, 1981

EDITED :

South & West (USA) : (Special India Issue, 1973)

Chandrabhaga : (A magazine of new writing from India)

The Telegraph : Poetry Editor

From The Other End

Poems by Banira Giri

Adapted from the Nepali *by Yuyutsu R. D.*

(With a Foreword *by Ramanand Rathi*)

Entrapped in the callous contexts of life, Banira Giri continuously struggles to clutch a fireball of human warmth and energy. Yuyutsu R. D. adapts her representative poems known in the world of Nepali literature for their throbbing social impact.

"Banira Giri's poems, the crying notes of alarm that keep you awake *in your languid world.*"

–Dinman

"Banira Giri has given mythic literature of Narsingh-avtar its required status"

–Samiksha

Men Before Fire

Poems by Bimal Nibha

Adapted from the Nepali by Yuyutsu R. D.

(With a Foreword *by Ramanand Rathi*)

Bimal Nibha, Nepal's noted poet, spreads before us the turbulent life of the country. "These are not just poems," says Ramanand Rathi in the Foreword to the book "but *documents of brutal social conditions too.* Yuyutsu R D.'s penetrating and evocative translations have given the experi*ences of a crushed human being a thundering expression.*"

"Bimal has given fresh contexts to the issues of an average mind. The poems can shatter the nocturnal silence of a *Hauze Khaas* dweller"

–Yuyutsu R. D. (Form the Introduction)